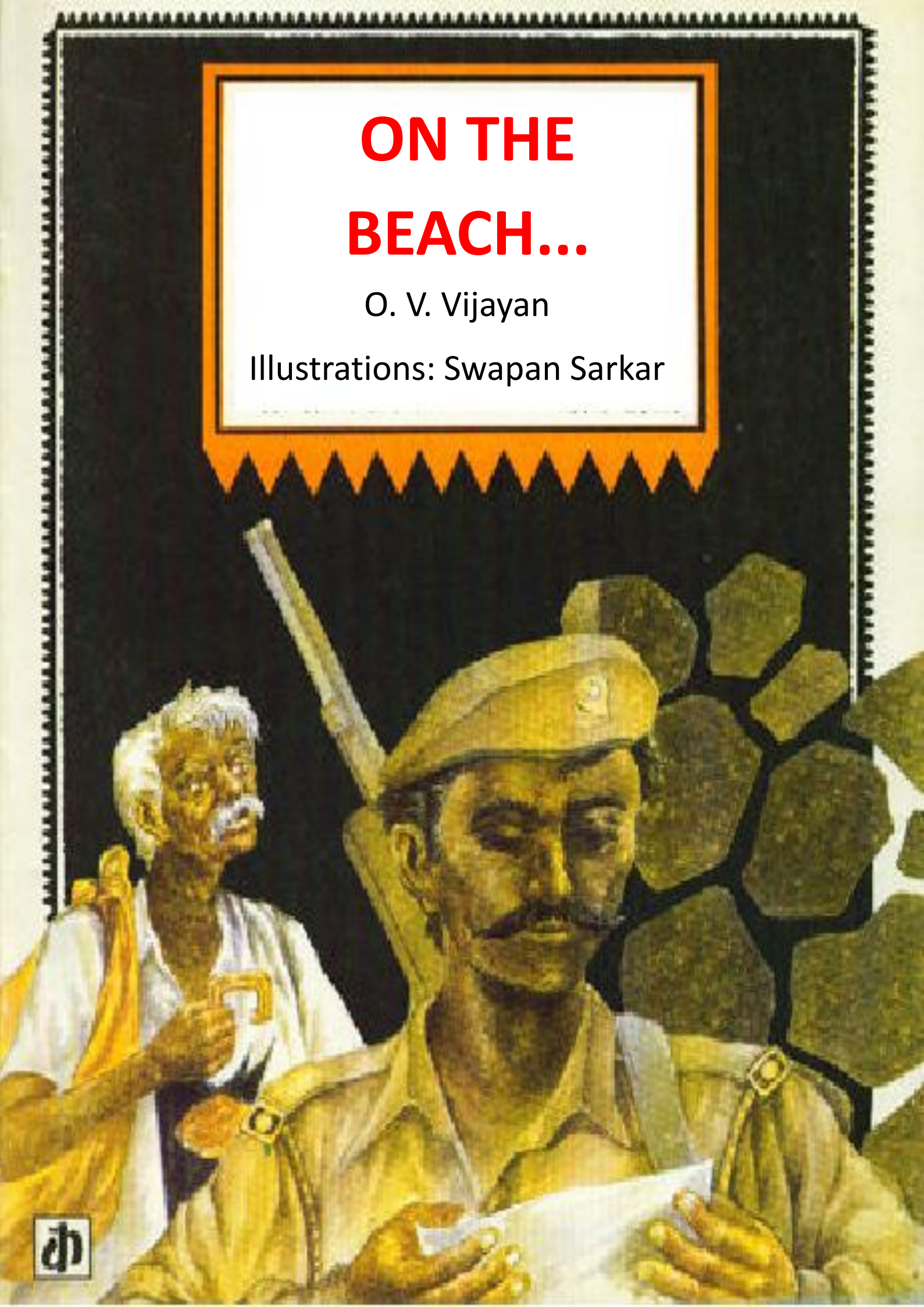
ON THE BEACH...

O. V. Vijayan

Illustrations: Swapan Sarkar



O. V. Vijayan

Shri O. V. Vijayan is a renowned Malayalam writer. His first novel, "Khaskinte Ithihasam," is considered a powerful literary masterpiece. His second novel, "Dharmapuranam," was a scathing satire on contemporary politics, creating a sensation. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1991 for his novel, "Guru Sagaram." He also translated stories from his native language into English.

Even in his short stories, Shri Vijayan never fails to criticize the atrocities committed by the government against the people. Through simple language, he reveals human emotions.

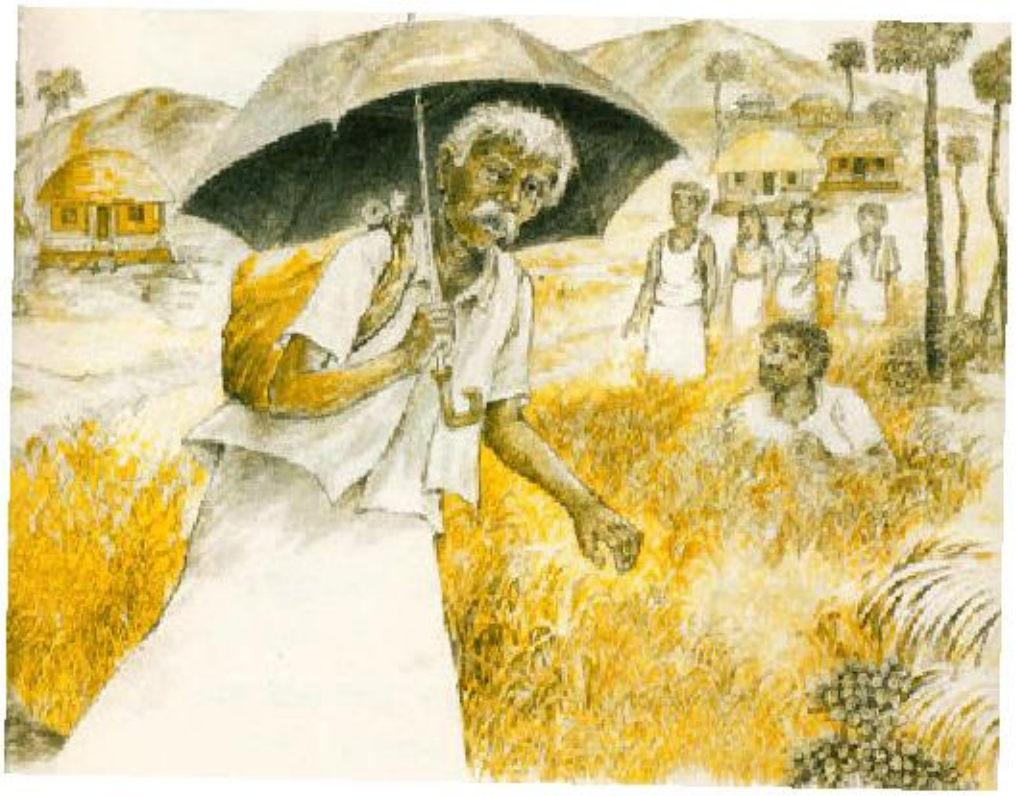
" On the Beach... " is also a story steeped in these sentiments.

Velaiyi-Appan's journey began. Sounds of weeping and wailing began to rise from his hut. Velaiyi-Appan was on his way to Kannur. The entire village was filled with grief.

If the villagers had their way, they would all have gone with him. Now, it was as if he was traveling alone on behalf of the entire village.

The railway station was four miles away. Passing the last hut, Velaiyi-Appan walked along the edge of the paddy fields.

Now the cries behind him were beginning to subside. After the ridge, he had to cross a pasture. That's where the trail began. There were Palm trees lined on both sides of the trail.



The bundle slung over Velai-Appan's shoulder contained curd-rice. The water soaked the bundle had soaked his arm. His wife had kneaded it for a long time. Along with the curds, her tears were also mixed in it.

He stepped aside

"Velayi," said Kuttihasan.

“Kuttihasan,” Velaiyi-appan replied.

Just two words. Just two names. But it felt like a long conversation, lamenting and consoling.

O Kuttihasan, those unspoken words said,
I have to repay your debt.

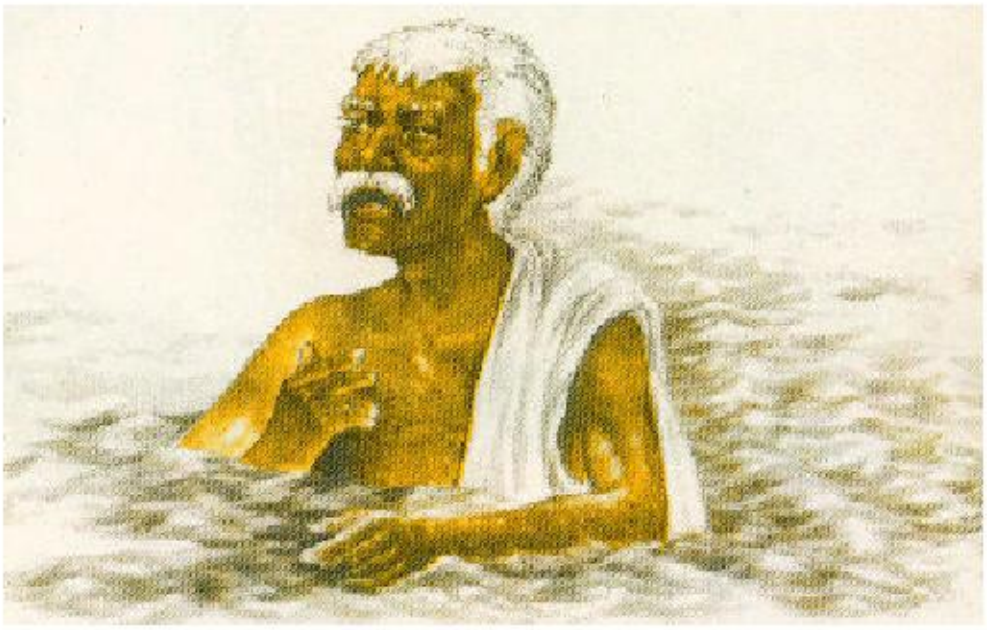
During this journey, do not let that debt
burden your heart, O Velayai.

Kuttihasan, after this trip,
I may never be able to repay your debt.

As the Prophet wishes!

He will protect you on your journey!

Velaiyi-Appan moved forward. Further ahead, the trail met a dirt road. Then the dirt road descended to the river. Velaiyi-Appan entered the river. Seeing its vastness, his heart filled with joy.



He remembered the day he had bathed his father's body in this very river. And when his son had first learned to swim in its waves. His eyes welled with tears.

He stopped on the river bank for a while.

Across the river, at a slight elevation, near a meadow, was the railway station. As soon as he reached the station, he went to the ticket counter. Carefully, he untied the knot at the corner of the cloth. He took out the money for the trip.

He took the ticket and wrapped it back in the cloth. Then he sat on a bench on the platform and waited for the train. After a while, an elderly passenger came and sat next to him.

The strangers' words hung like a noose around Velai-Appan's neck. Once you leave your village and cross the long ridge, the whole world seems filled with such strangers. And their words, are like a million nooses.

The train to Coimbatore arrived.

The stranger boarded it and left.

Velai-Appan was left alone on the bench. He didn't feel like opening the rice packet. He simply ran his hand over it, feeling its wetness. After a while, he fell asleep. He dreamt and cried out, “Kanduni, my son!”

The sound of the train woke him. He got up in a hurry, fumbled with his ticket, wrapped in the cloth, and made his way through the crowd, moving forward.

"This is first class, Baba."

"Oh! Okay?"

He peeked into the other compartment.

“This one is reserved."

"Good?"

"Go ahead, Baba."

Strange voices.

Then Velaiyi-Appan boarded a compartment. There was no room to sit. I'm fine standing. There's no need to sleep. My son will be awake tonight.

When he reached Kannur, it wasn't yet morning. The bundle of curd-rice still hung from his shoulder, oozing wetness. He came out of the station.

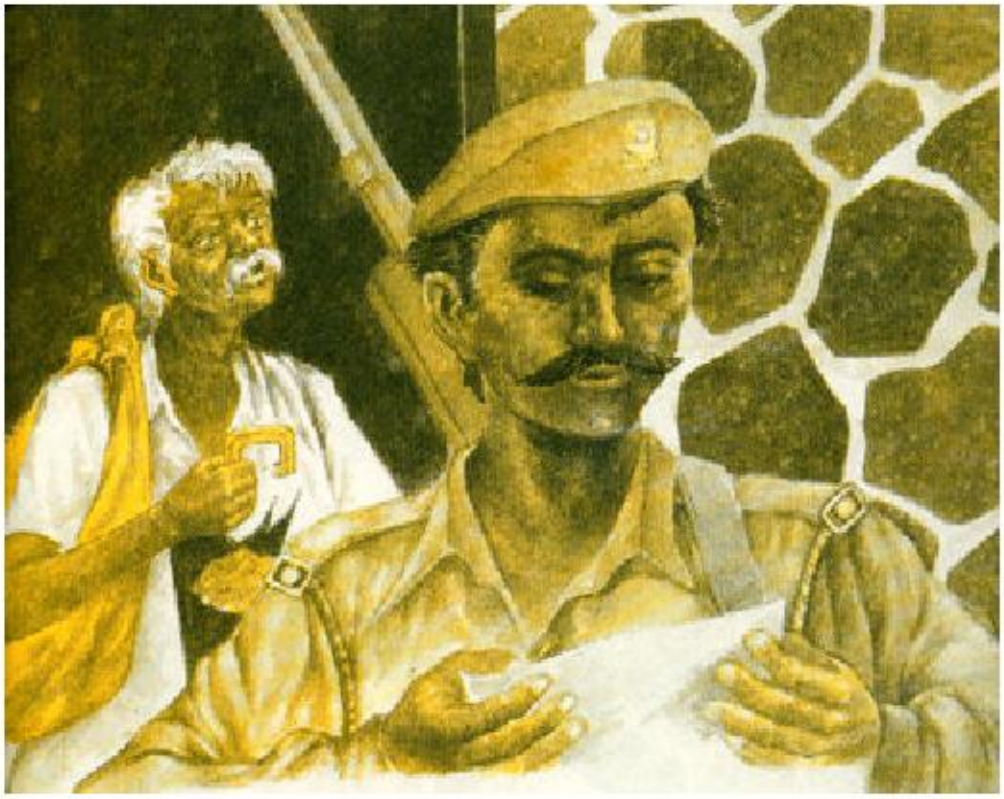
The first rays of the sun were beginning to lift the darkness. On one side, some horse-carriage drivers stood huddled, chatting. Velayai-Appan asked them, "How do I get to the jail?"

One man laughed. The old man is asking for directions to the jail early in the morning. Another man laughed, "Baba, there's nothing much to do. Just steal a little, and you'll get there on your own." These words from strangers made Velayai-Appan feel suffocated.

Then someone showed him the right way. Velayai-Appan started walking.

The jail guard stopped him, "How come you are here so early in the morning?"

Velaiyi-Appan was frightened. He slowly untied the knot at the corner of the cloth. He pulled out a crumpled, yellowed piece of paper. Handing it to over the guard, he said, "My son is here."



The guard's gaze was riveted to the words on the paper. His stern face softened.

"Tomorrow, right?" he asked, comforting him.

"I don't know. Everything is written there."

The guard read the order again. “Yes,” he said, "Tomorrow morning at five o'clock."

Velayai-Appan was surprised, "Okay?"

"Baba, sit down and rest for a while."

Velaiyi-Appan sat down on the bench near the entrance. My son must not have slept last night. Without sleeping, he must not have woken up either. How will he eat without sleeping or waking up? He stroked the curd-rice bundle. Son, your mother made this curd-rice for you. I did not eat it during my journey and brought it here. I have nothing else to offer you.

After a long delay, a guard led them inside the prison. Behind the bars of the cell, stood Kanduni. The guard opened the lock.

Father and son stood facing each other, completely terrified. Velayai-appan stepped forward and embraced his son.

He said, "My son."

"Father," said Kanduni.

These words, that’s all! A sad conversation between father and son!

Son, what did you do?

I don't remember.

Did you commit murder, my son?

I don't remember.

It doesn't matter son, there is not much left to remember now.

Will those guards remember?

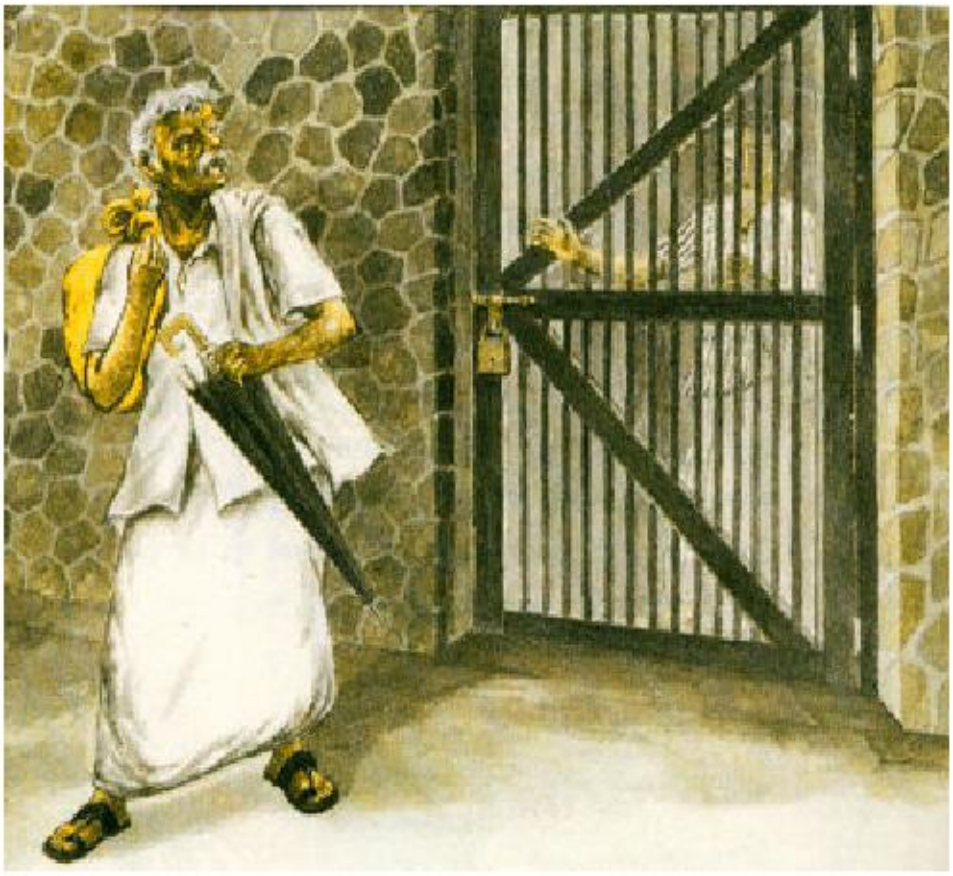
No, my son.

Father, will you remember my pain.

Then Kanduni screamed loudly, Father stop them.

Stop me from being hanged.

Then the time for visiting the prisoner ended.



Velaiyi-Appan came out. He turned back and took a last look at his son. Kanduni was peeking from behind the bars, like a passenger peeking from a moving train.

Velaiyi-Appan wandered aimlessly around the prison. The sun reached its peak, then slowly began to set. Night fell.

Then dawn ….

Velaiyi-Appan took his son's body from the guards. A pit was dug in a deserted area, outside the city. Before burying him, Velaiyi-Appan looked at his son's face one last time. Placing his hand on his cold forehead, he blessed him. Finally, the pit was filled and leveled.

While wandering, Velayai-Appan reached the seashore. Then he felt something cold and wet. It was the curd-rice that his wife had made for the journey. Velayai-Appan opened the bundle and scattered it on the sand. For the peace of the departed soul...